

In This Exhibition, You Walk Through Excrement

By Nina Siegal

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ROTTERDAM, the Netherlands — When I entered the exhibition, I was invited to get nude. I searched a clothes rack filled with skin-toned “naked costumes” featuring all shapes and sizes of male and female genitalia, and chose a peach-color hermaphroditic garment, with teddy-bear fur, a male member between its legs and wide-set breasts. I pulled it on over my clothes.

Then I walked into the excrement.

There were four giant turds inside the 16,000 square feet of museum space. One mammoth piece of feces was reminiscent of a long, winding steel sculpture by Richard Serra. One was a brown spiral. Another resembled an enormous chocolate chip. Yet another featured intertwined layers with a gap in between that I could have crawled through, if I had been brave enough.

All four sculptures of fecal matter sat on elegant Persian rugs, like welcome-home gifts left by a huge, vengeful dog.

The exhibition, “Gelatin: Vorm — Fellows — Attitude,” at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, running through Aug. 12, is the latest work by Gelatin (also sometimes spelled Gelitin), a Vienna-based art collective known for breaking taboos, evoking nervous laughter, and getting intimate with bodies and their excretions.



Left to right: Tobias Urban, Ali Janka, Florian Reither and Wolfgang Gantner, the four artists in Gelatin. Michel de Groot for The New York Times

The four artists who make up the collective, Wolfgang Gantner, Ali Janka, Florian Reither and Tobias Urban, spent two weeks building up the sculptures in situ in the large contemporary galleries at the Boijmans before the opening on May 19. A team of helpers first constructed enormous plaster casts and then covered them by hand with thick brown clay.

It was, all told, “about three or four elephants’ worth of clay,” said Mr. Janka in a group interview with the artists in the museum’s staff canteen. Mr. Urban chimed in to correct him, suggesting that each sculpture was actually as heavy as “an elephant and a hippopotamus.”

Any museum show that presents excrement to its visitors as art has to expect at least a little scandal. Sjarel Ex, director of the Boijmans, said he had no problem with that.



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“It could be the first time that all art enemies and art lovers can agree about one thing,” he said, with a smile. They could all say that it’s poop, he said, though he used a more colorful word.

Mr. Ex said that he had no hesitation about commissioning the work. He said the show had many possible interpretations.

“You can approach it from the field of sculpture, you can approach it as an installation that was tailor-made for these big rooms,” he said, “and you can see it as a provocation and then explore what side of you is provoked. That’s also very interesting. You can also see it as an intimate experience you keep only for yourself.”

Gelatin’s work is often raw, brutal and absurd, and often intentionally, but playfully, repellent. The artists have made a “human birthday cake” in which they arranged themselves naked in a circle, with lit candles coming out of their anuses. In 2000, they illegally broke into the World Trade Center and installed a small balcony on the 91st floor (a stunt that lasted a mere 19 minutes or so). In 2005, their projects included a sculpture made from frozen urine and a 180-foot pink toy bunny, which they left to decompose on the side of a mountain in the Italian Alps.



In “Rabbit,” a 2005 work, Gelatin left a 180-foot pink toy bunny to decompose on the side of a mountain in the Italian Alps. Gelatin

Their form of performance-based, interactive art has roots in the 1960s Situationist and Fluxus movements, said the exhibition’s curator, Francesco Stocchi, and particularly in the Austrian avant-garde movement called Viennese Actionism, whose artists often used their own naked bodies as a canvas, and blood, milk or entrails as their materials. Since 1993, Gelatin has exhibited all over the world, including at the Venice Biennale, the Greene Naftali gallery in New York, a cave in Puerto Rico, and, most recently, at the Fondazione Prada in Milan.

“They tend to use two powerful tools: humor and simplification,” said Mr. Stocchi, who is the Boijman’s curator of modern and contemporary art. “Simple doesn’t mean to make it easy but to have a clarity of intentions. The intention is confronting ourselves with our own fears, or our own preconceived notions or taboos, which we can also call prejudices. When we have prejudices, what can we do? We can discuss. So the exhibition is an arena for discussion.”

Mr. Stocchi invited Gelatin to create a piece for the museum’s contemporary Bodon Wing, which was built in the 1970s to accommodate land art pieces, minimalist installations and monumental art.

In the interview, however, Mr. Janka challenged the use of “monumental” to describe the turd sculptures. “Monumental is the wrong word because what we’re really interested in is the un-monumental,” he said.



“It’s a monument for inclusiveness,” one of the artists said, “because everyone can relate to it.” Michel de Groot for The New York Times

“For me, they are monumental,” Mr. Urban said.

“But if they’re monumental, what is the monument for?” Mr. Gantner asked.

“It’s a monument for inclusiveness,” Mr. Urban replied, “because everyone can relate to it.”

That short exchange gives a glimpse of how the four artists work together, discussing and debating the terms of their work even when it is already on show.

And why the naked suits? Is the idea to make visitors feel more vulnerable to the experience?



Visitors to the exhibition are asked to don “naked costumes” featuring various shapes and sizes of male and female genitalia.

Michel de Groot for The New York Times

“It’s a way of getting them out of their clothes without undressing them,” Mr. Urban said. “With clothes, you know immediately that someone is a banker or something else and when you get them out of their own clothes they can be anybody.”

The Boijmans van Beuningen is probably best known for its large collection of early Dutch and Flemish paintings, which include works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch, Renaissance artists who explored drolleries, grotesque hybrid beings, and people and animals engaged in all kinds of coarse behavior. The museum also has a collection of surrealist art.

“If you look into the work of Gelatin, you see that they very often refer to those artists,” Mr. Ex said. “The strange performances that they do and even the costumes — you put on one of their costumes and look like you come from one of those paintings. It’s not a re-enactment of Bosch or Bruegel, but it’s a kind of mentality that belongs to this museum.”

Mr. Ex said he had anticipated that the show might cause a sensation and that there would be some adverse reactions from visitors. In the weeks since the exhibition opened, however, Dutch art critics have mostly been receptive of the work, although there have been negative comments on the museum’s Facebook page.

“We are a free space, so we can do things that are silly and also maybe a sign of bad taste,” Mr. Ex said. “This is a museum, here is a place where artists work and we have to defend the freedom of showing things, so there’s a bigger side to it.”

But, he added, “so far, my experience is that people just enjoyed it and had fun with it.”